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March 31, 2005

DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY
OFFICE OF HEARINGS AND APPEALS

Name of Case: Worker Appeal

Date of Filing: September 8, 2004

Case No.: TIA-0189

XXXXXXXXXXXXX (the Applicant) applied to the Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Worker Advocacy (OWA) for assistance in filing for state workers' compensation benefits for her late father (the Worker). The Worker was a DOE contractor employee at a DOE facility. An independent physician panel (the Physician Panel or the Panel) found that the Worker did not have an illness related to a toxic exposure at DOE. The OWA accepted the Panel's determination, and the Applicant filed an appeal with the DOE's Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA). As explained below, we have concluded that the Appeal should be denied.

I. Background

A. The Relevant Statute and Regulations

The Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act of 2000 as amended (the Act) concerns workers involved in various ways with the nation's atomic weapons program. See 42 U.S.C. §§ 7384, 7385. As originally enacted, the Act provided for two programs. Subpart B provided for a Department of Labor (DOL) program providing federal compensation for certain illnesses. See 20 C.F.R. Part 30. Subpart D provided for a DOE assistance program for DOE contractor employees filing for state workers' compensation benefits. Under the DOE program, an independent physician panel assessed whether a claimed illness or death arose out of and in the course of the worker's employment, and exposure to a toxic substance, at a DOE facility. 42 U.S.C. § 7385o(d)(3); 10 C.F.R. Part 852 (the Physician Panel Rule). The OWA was responsible for this program.

The Physician Panel Rule provided for an appeal process. An applicant could appeal a decision by the OWA not to submit an application to a Physician Panel, a negative determination by a Physician Panel that was accepted by the OWA, and a final decision by the OWA not to accept a Physician Panel determination in favor of an applicant. The instant appeal was filed pursuant to that Section. The Applicant sought review of a negative determination by a Physician Panel that was accepted by the OWA. 10 C.F.R. § 852.18(a)(2).

While the Applicant's appeal was pending, Congress repealed Subpart D. Ronald W. Reagan Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005, Pub. L. No. 108-375 (October 28, 2004) (the Authorization Act). Congress added a new subpart to the Act, Subpart E, which establishes a DOL workers' compensation program for DOE contractor employees. Under Subpart E, all Subpart D claims will be considered as Subpart E claims. *Id.* § 3681(g). In addition, under Subpart E, an applicant is deemed to have an illness related to a workplace toxic exposure at DOE if the applicant received a positive determination under Subpart B. *Id.* § 3675(a).

During the transition period, in which DOL sets up the Subpart E program, OHA continues to process appeals of negative OWA determinations.

B. Procedural Background

The Worker was employed as a maintenance supervisor at the Oak Ridge Gaseous Diffusion Plant (the plant). He worked at the plant for approximately 36 years, from 1945 to 1981.

The Applicant filed an application with OWA, requesting physician panel review of the Worker's renal failure and congestive heart failure (CHF). The Applicant claimed that these illnesses were due to exposures to toxic and hazardous materials at the plant. The Physician Panel rendered a negative determination on both illnesses. In reviewing the Worker's renal failure, the Panel discussed the fact that it developed after his retirement and was related to his CHF. In considering the Worker's CHF, the Panel cited abnormalities in the structure of the blood supply system to his heart. The Panel discussed the potential exposures at the plant, and concluded that the Worker's occupational exposures were not a factor in his renal failure or CHF. See Physician's Panel Report.

The OWA accepted the Physician Panel's determination. The Applicant filed the instant appeal. In her appeal, the Applicant challenges the negative determination. The Applicant argues that the Panel erred when it concluded that the Worker's illness was not related to his employment at the plant. The Applicant asserts that the Panel determination was based on her father's stay at the Oak Ridge Hospital and did not consider exposures over his 36 years of employment. See Applicant's Appeal Letter.

II. Analysis

Under the Physician Panel Rule, independent physicians rendered an opinion whether a claimed illness was related to exposure to toxic substances during employment at a DOE facility. The Rule required that the Panel address each claimed illness, make a finding whether that illness was related to toxic exposure at the DOE site, and state the basis for that finding. 10 C.F.R. § 852.12.

The Applicant's argument - that the Panel did not take into account the Worker's entire work history - is inconsistent with the Panel report. The Panel acknowledged that the Worker was "undoubtedly exposed to many toxins." See Report at 1. The Panel determined, however, there was no relationship between the occupational exposures and the Worker's condition. Thus, the Applicant's disagreement with that determination is merely a disagreement with the Panel's medical judgment, rather than an indicator of Panel error.

As the foregoing indicates, the appeal should be denied. In compliance with Subpart E, the claim will be transferred to the DOL for review. The DOL is in the process of developing procedures for evaluating and issuing decisions on these claims. OHA's denial of this claim does not purport to dispose of or in any way prejudice the DOL's review of the claim under Subpart E.

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED THAT:

- (1) The Appeal filed in Worker Advocacy Case No. TIA-0189 be, and hereby is, denied.
- (2) This denial pertains only to the DOE claim and not to the DOL's review of this claim under Subpart E.

(3) This is a final order of the Department of Energy.

George B. Breznay
Director
Office of Hearings and Appeals

Date: March 31, 2005